

MONTGOMERY NOTEBOOK

Domestic Workers' 'Bill of Rights' Lacks Council Backing

By NANCY TERKOS
Washington Post Staff Writer

Domestic workers in Montgomery County won't be getting their own "bill of rights" to protect them from relatively low salaries and poor health insurance. That decision will be left to the next County Council elected in November.

Council President **George L. Leventhal** (D-At Large), who is up for reelection, said this week that no council member would sponsor a bill calling for a minimum wage of \$10.50 an

hour as well as health insurance, paid sick days and paid holidays for domestic workers, many of them Hispanic women who work as housekeepers or nannies.

A survey commissioned by the council and conducted by George Washington University graduate students this year found that domestic workers are underpaid, work long hours and receive inadequate health-care benefits and retirement provisions.

On Monday, the Montgomery County Commission for Women sent a memo to the council recommending that the county conduct a pub-

lic information campaign about workers' rights and employers' responsibilities and create a community-based resource center for domestic workers with a designated liaison from the county government. The commission did not take a position on the bill of rights.

Leventhal said he and other council members would consider the commission's recommendations but had concerns about the bill of rights.

"I think for us to establish rights in law for the private market, demanding certain wages and benefits, it's a dramatic step that county

government has not taken before," he said. "We do not regulate wages and benefits for the private market today."

CASA of Maryland, the nonprofit immigrant advocacy group that has led the bill of rights effort, is not giving up.

Alexis de Simone, CASA's women's organizer, said that the organization would lobby **Ducky Trachtenberg** and **Valerie Ervin**, the two female non-incumbent Democratic nominees for council seats in the Nov. 7 general election.

Lack of Support for Domestic Workers' 'Bill of Rights'

"I think they're going to be a lot more responsive to the needs of our community and the needs of low-income working women," de Simone said.

Trachtenberg said she would support a community-based center for the workers but stopped short of backing the legislation.

"I'm certainly hopeful that I'll have conversations with CASA about this in the future," she said. "As to what I would sponsor, I'm not quite sure at this point what that would be."

Ervin said she wants domestic workers to get better treatment but thinks the bill of rights proposal is flawed.

"The bill was just not ready for prime time, and it's got a lot of problems with it because I don't think the county has any legal standing to do what they are asking the county to do," she said.

Leventhal said part of the problem with the bill of rights is that it would exclude other employees.

"Domestic workers for the most part don't get two weeks' paid vacation but neither do bartenders or cab drivers," Leventhal said.

De Simone said domestic workers are particularly vulnerable. "Domestic workers have been so isolated and so excluded from labor protection that they need labor protection," she said.

Legislation for 'Champion Trees'

The County Council on Tuesday unanimously approved emergency legislation to protect "champion trees," or trees designated by the state as the largest of their species with-



Bette Petrides speaks to a group of neighbors who have rallied to protect a weeping cherry tree at 7708 Marbury Rd. Petrides is the founder of Citizens for a Better Bethesda.

in the county.

Council member **Howard A. Denis** (R-Potomac/Bethesda) sponsored the bill after a group of Bethesda residents embarked on a mission to save a weeping cherry tree at 7708 Marbury Rd.

"I am very concerned about the rapid loss of urban and suburban trees in the county," Denis said in a statement. "Trees and urban forests offer numerous community and environmental benefits. There ought to be some protection for our finest trees."

Denis said his bill was aimed at getting rid of ambiguities in the existing forest conservation law, which some county officials said was not applicable to properties smaller than 40,000 square feet. The bill would protect champion trees regardless of where they are or the size of the lot.

"I'm encouraged," said **Steve Kanstoroom**, an Ashton resident who helped craft the law. "I think Howie Denis showed he's a champion of champions. This is an important step in protecting Montgomery County tree canopies."

It was unclear this week if the legislation would allay concerns. **Bette Petrides**, founder of Citizens for a Better Bethesda, which led the effort to save the tree from demolition, said she was pleased with the legislation but would like to see the county do more to conserve other types of trees.

"We would like to see this act blossom into something that also protects specimen trees and urban trees throughout the county," she said.

Eco-Friendly Construction Bill

Also Tuesday, the council unanimously approved a bill that would require builders to use environmentally friendly methods to prevent water runoff from new construction or large renovations onto existing properties.

"As neighborhood discontent over infill construction increases in the downcounty, the height and size of new or renovated homes is getting a lot of attention, but the impacts from water runoff on adjacent properties can often be a bigger, more costly problem for neighbors," said County Council member **Nancy Floreen** (D-At Large), sponsor of the bill, in a statement.

County officials said they believe the bill is the first of its kind in the nation. It will go into effect March 1.

County Executive Debate

Montgomery College's Channel 10 will rebroadcast a debate among county executive candidates sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County.

The dates are today, 7 p.m.; tomorrow, 6 p.m.; next Thursday, 7 p.m. and Oct. 27 at 6 p.m.